

Normandy – Even More Delightful Than I Imagined.



Pré Catelan, photogravure etching

The channel crossing proved to be a momentous occasion, one of the last on the largest hovercraft the world has ever seen or perhaps ever will see (the Princess Margaret). Outfitted with four Rolls-Royce aircraft engines, as she lifts up, her skirts billow out, and she advances without ceremony from shore to sea. The seas were pretty rough outside, but the Princess Margaret kept an even keel except there is no keel. With 40 knots off the French coast there was some side-to-side swaying and a few sudden downswings, but 40 minutes from Dover we were on land again. So much more thrilling than the Chunnel! The port at Calais is simply a beach, no ropes, no docks, no moorings, the boat if you can call it that just squats down and disgorges its passengers.

From close-up the White Cliffs of Dover are a sort of dull chalky off-white, but from Calais and the Cap de Nez Blanc they shimmer brilliantly in the reflected sun. The early Celts must have thought them magical. Lovely drive on the coast road through ploughed-up fields and little towns toward Boulogne and beyond. I rented a Renault Clio, intentionally small so that I could drive through narrow cobblestoned streets of country towns and park easily. But I neglected an essential item of information. In search of the coast road in Calais I hit an unmarked dead-end and discovered there was no way, *absolument* no way, to put the car into reverse. The car's instruction book covered only *automatique*. A kind citizen advised just *montez sur le trottoir*, so I did that and returned to the car rental agency which fortunately had not yet closed. There the secret of Renault's reverse gear was disclosed to me (lift up on the flange) and I was on my way. Not much traffic once out of town, and with frequent stops to enjoy the salt air and the dunes and the various views of the White Cliffs, soon it was evening somewhere beyond Boulogne. Having not eaten very much in preparation for the Channel crossing, the local seafood was just the thing.

The harbors of Dieppe, Honfleur, and other coastal towns with their 17th-century buildings, narrow cobblestoned streets, rustic Norman churches, shops

with the most delicate lace, and superb seafood restaurants, urged me to stay longer. In the inner Quai Henri IV of Dieppe a delightful assembly of boats, not the 17th-century variety of course but while gazing one can project them back in time, against a backdrop of charming multi-colored buildings that do look suitably antique.

In [Dieppe](#) I happened on a kite-flying festival, children of all ages running happily over the beaches where a battalion of Canadians was slaughtered in 1942. In a way that's what they died for, that even the memory of battle be forgotten. The beach is actually made of small rocks that clatter when the waves lap over them. The Église St Remy in Dieppe also has a particularly fine organ, one of those French baroque ones with a beautiful deep bass that totally fills the room and its inhabitants. The Église Saint-Jacques managed to get hit in just about every war of the past millenium but retains some fantastic gargoyles, thrusting their grotesque heads out at odd angles.

The evening meal started with *moules a la Normande*, a whole bowl of them, tender and yet deep with a light cream and herbs, each one better than the last. No sooner had I dispatched them than the *macquereau a la moutarde* arrived, a delightful dish with local vegetables. Followed by Neufchatel cheese which was great but I couldn't finish it, as I apologetically explained to the waitress, as the *poire hélène* was yet to come. I did manage to finish that. The total bill was \$25. *Tout compris*, including wine, mineral water, and a generous tip. The exchange rate of 7.2 francs to the dollar is the best I have ever experienced.

Étretat, further down the coast, has alabaster cliffs from which the ocean has carved sea stacks and arches. From the pathway to the top of the cliffs, incongruously flanked by a golf course, the town appears smaller, and the church on the hill beyond somewhat lonely. Back on the beach, surfers challenge the waves with more panache than skill – they fall with great style, as if shot. Through more charming country towns inland, St Valery-en-Caux among them, bypassing the refineries of Le Havre, I drove over the new Pont de Normandie to Honfleur.

In Honfleur the church is a curious double-naved structure whose roof looks like an upturned boat, not surprising since it was built by shipwrights. All throughout this section of the Normandy coast the light is superb, the clouds constantly moving, squalls blowing in from the Channel followed by brilliant sunlight, several times in the course of a day. The Impressionists knew what they were about, settling there.

Further down the coast (driving east to west), the French-Victorian resorts of Trouville and Deauville with their huge French-Victorian mansions and other remnants of past glory like antique-auto rallies and polo fields, and hardly a soul anywhere, struck me as mausolea. I understand it's livelier in the summer. Fortunately the means of escape were readily to hand, and the little *voiture* next took me to ... Cabourg, Proust's Balbec. What's there is the Grand Hotel. That's it. You can see Proust's room if it isn't occupied (it was). That's where he wrote *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*. Like the battlefields further on down the Normandy coast, there are few visual reminders of the great things that happened there.

I took advantage of a torrential downpour to cover the substantial distance from there to Avranches, a lovely medieval town perched on the heights overlooking the Bay of St-Michel. Abandoning my usual practice of not reserving anything in advance, I reserved a place right on the island of [Mont St-Michel](#), as this is the second-most-visited destination in France after the Eiffel Tower. It is not only an abbey, but a fortress that withstood the onslaughts of the English, but

unlike most fortress-type castles it seems a most livable place. Plainsong chanting filled the Abbey, and the light on the stonework outside changed dramatically as clouds drifted overhead. Small streets and alleys suddenly open up to views of the sea or the estuary. I don't even mind the crowds, I'm used to that in Japan, and indeed the resemblances to Enoshima don't stop there – the causeway from the mainland, the central shopping street with bric-a-brac, the dramatic clouds, the thousand-year continuity all recalled that other tenuously connected island. My room is right over the narrow central pathway, three floors up, but worth the climb since I have a closeup view of the Mont right out the window. And the bells toll the hours. I walked on the ramparts around the perimeter, peered through the lookouts in the three-foot-thick walls at – not the invading English, but some cormorant-like birds diligently fishing below. On the island itself, the assemblage of buildings seems random and almost discordant, but from a distance Mont St-Michel is like a thing of nature, an actual mont growing out of the sea. The surrounding countryside of cornfields or of [sheep and cattle](#) grazing make it all the more magical.

From there it was a tough choice whether to go on to Brittany or turn inland. I wanted to go all the way to Finistère, to Brest, which I had first heard of in 9th grade when Mlle Berger would read the poetry of Jacques Prévert ('*Il pleuvait sans cesse sur Brest ce jour-là.*'). Had Mlle Berger been less attractive, I would have a much more difficult time making my way through France now. But by this time I had only one week more, and what's the point of merely driving a lot of kilometers? But the driving was fun too, equipped as I was with very detailed maps to travel almost entirely over back roads. It was surprisingly easy to get around, the roundabouts give you time to decide and you can always circle around again (looking like a bit player in a Monsieur Hulot's Holiday movie, it's true) if necessary. The French drivers are intolerant of people who don't know where they're going or of anyone driving at less than 20 km/hr over the speed limit. Don't they know how stunningly beautiful their countryside is? This took some getting used to, but eventually I did. Anyway it was time to head toward...

Combray, the fictional town where *A La Recherche* takes place, originally called Illiers, but now officially renamed Illiers-Combray in honor of Proust. It's still a sleepy village that closes down completely on Sunday (after church, that is). As described in the novel, the place seems quite large with many different precincts, but, just as when you return as an adult to where you grew up – as in fact happens whenever I go to my hometown Pittsburgh – the place seems so much smaller and it's almost impossible to imagine the state of mind in which it was your whole world. That sort of memory is the world of Proust. The village of Illiers-Combray has thoughtfully marked the places where Proust wandered which are identifiable in the novel, the *Coté de Chez Swann*, the *Coté de Guermantes*, the *Pré Catalan*, a garden built by his rich uncle Jules for the villagers to wander around in like Parisians could do in the Bois de Boulogne, the site of numerous reveries. '*Il y avait autour de Combray deux cotés pour la promenade: Le coté de Méséglise la Vineuse, qu'on appelait aussi le coté de chez Swann, et le coté de Guermantes.*' A lovely park with a meandering river, le [vieux pont](#), a dream garden. The world of the novel and of the actual village today blend with each other in a curious way.

At *La Maison de Tante Léonie*, you can also see photos by Jules Nadar of Proust's family, friends, and those who served as models for *A La Recherche*. I lingered over the one of Gilberte, I forget her real name, a darling dreamy little girl, the one in the novel whom Marcel met in the *Pré Catalan* who gave a very convincing show of being uninterested because she was with her family, and he only learned her name when someone called '*Gilberte! Qu'est-ce que tu fais?*' The *itinéraire proustien* takes you through the town, the church whose bell sounded the quarter-hours so distinctly, the exploits of Florent d'Illiers who helped Jeanne d'Arc defeat the English, the Guermantes Way, the source of the

Loir, Tansonville (Swann's house), and further if you like. While enjoying my own version of the madeleine-dipped-in-tisane reverie, I also gathered material for an exhibition on the art of memory and other proustian themes held in London.

All the names that Proust made up have been signposted as if they were the real names, and *pourquoi pas*? Even the SNCF Station is called Illiers-Combray. Is not the memory, after all, more truthful than what we falsely honor with the term 'reality.' [Yes.] And yet is there not also something absurd about this reification of *un reve*? [Yes.]

I thought at first THIS was the place to spend a few days. It's a sleepy town, probably much as it was in Proust's day. I stayed at a *chambre d'hôte* in the middle of a farm outside of town, *faute de mieux* but it was OK. The only noise when I returned at night was the rustling of bats in the trees. My flashlight disturbed them not at all, but the sound of my footsteps roused them, and only their barely visible dark forms and darting motions told me they were bats and not birds. Otherwise utter quiet and dark. But something there is about a bed-and-breakfast that makes me long for a Ramada Inn. Inevitably a sad or even tragic history pervades such places, as you are constantly reminded by photographs of departed souls, layers of personal memorabilia, reminders of the *propriétaire's* vigorous youth out in the fields with his hunting dogs, a startling contrast to the broken-down figure you see before you who can hardly climb the stairs. At such times I appreciate the genius of those who designed perfectly impersonal habitats, all exactly identical to one another, devoid of the slightest touch of humanity.

But visitors to Combray on Sunday don't eat. The only restaurant in town was closed, as were all the bars, boulangeries (both), brasseries (both), and anything else. *Absolument rien*. I dined on the madeleines that I had previously bought.

Next stop: [Giverny](#), the Monet gardens. Here my lack of planning almost caught up with me, as I arrived on a Monday when the gardens were closed. But they let me in to join a group visiting from - Japan! They were there, gardeners and all, to build a water garden like Monet's in their city in Japan. The real water lilies are naturally different from those in the paintings, but you could sort of see how he got there, being there. The gardens themselves are exquisite, dreamy, a great place to wander around for a day. There are literally dozens of gardens in the region, many in the English Romantic style which is highly valued in France. The geometric style of Versailles is not universally admired. I had time for only one other, Le [Bois de Moutiers](#), a Luytens-Jekyll garden near Dieppe with soaring vistas of trees of various heights and types of foliage arranged in a sort of Poussin landscape. Unlike the usual chalky soil of the region, that of Les Moutiers is acid, allowing all sorts of species like Himalayan rhododendrons that wouldn't otherwise grow there.



Les Andelys, photogravure etching

After Giverny I journeyed backward a couple of centuries to Les Andelys, a lovely town on the banks of the Seine that was the home of Poussin. Along the quais of the Seine there it does look remarkably like a Poussin landscape. It is actually two towns, Petit Andely and (you guessed it) Grand Andely. I borrowed a bicycle from a kind citizen whom I met strolling on the quai, to get from one to the other, and also up to the Chateau Gaillard. The chateau was built by Richard Lionheart and later taken by Philippe Auguste, and that's how Normandy became French! It's an impressive ruin today. (I prefer ruined castles to ones in good repair.) I was just looking for the right place to go slow, and this is it. At the faster pace I sensed the beginnings of ennui, but now there is again an infinite variety of things to do and see.

After a couple of days in Les Andelys, I started off – and didn't get very far. La Bouille, delightfully situated on the Seine just where the river gets deep and the sea feels near, at first seemed like just another get-out-and-walk stop. Like the Chateau of Robert-le-diable or the bend of the Seine at Elbeuf. But a glance at the variety of half-timbered houses of Norman architecture and a couple of river-side restaurants caused me to break my rule of not having a substantial mid-day meal. Being close to the sea again, I tried the *assiette de fruits de mer*, the *poisson marche*, the *gritonne au chocolat*. More than enough, and less than \$20. The road across the river to Sahur is actually not a road but a cute little ferry that goes at irregular intervals. I strolled along the quais watching the boats, and around the narrow back streets, watching the women leaning out of windows tending flowers in window boxes.

As I suspected might be the case, I couldn't finish the second substantial meal of the day, so had the dessert and Calvados brought to my room. So petit déjeuner will be late. *Doucement, lentement*. Amiens, the next stop, is a fair-sized provincial city. The cathedral is awesome, the largest gothic cathedral in Europe, but light and airy withal – how did they do it?

Then through back roads along river valleys (L'Authie, Le Canche, les autres) to Montreuil, which I had visited briefly at the beginning of this trip, and this time

happened to find it possessed by a Saturday market. The most wonderful array of [artichokes](#), [garlics](#), onions, [potatoes](#), celeries, carrots, plus some pretty gruesome-looking blood sausages, and lots of more agreeable-looking flowers.

Then to Calais and the return to Dover via hovercraft, the last crossing of this thing which is both/neither boat nor plane; it just lifts off the sands of Calais like a huge camel and drifts into the Channel, not caring whether solid ground or liquid water is beneath it. The crossing is less than an hour but they consume more jet fuel than a Concorde, so are being retired after some 30 years of service.

-- Peter Daniel Miller, 2000.10.19